TRANSCRIPT—DEBRA COLLINGTON

Interviewee: Debra Collington

Interviewer: Phoebe Holler

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Phoebe Holler: If you would just say your name for me.

Debra Collington: Debra Collington.

PH: And what years did you attend you attend Stephens-Lee?

DC: I came in 1964. My class was the last freshman class at Stephens-Lee. After that we went to the new school which was South French Broad High then.

PH: Did you ever have to transfer to South French Broad River High or did you stay at Stephens-Lee?

DC: They closed Stephens-Lee. My class was the last class to be a part of the school and they opened up South French Broad and everybody went to South French Broad.

PH: Were there any teachers that made an impact on your life?

DC: Yes, there were a lot of them. One was Miss Foster, she was my History teacher. An elegant lady who was one of the best teachers that I ever had. Miss Gladys Forney. She

taught Social Studies. She was fantastic. Full of school spirit, always encouraging and always wanted you do the right thing. Didn't take any junk, she was five feet tall but a powerhouse. She was just awesome. And Miss Elizabeth Eubanks. She taught Spanish and she was also my homeroom teacher. Just another elegant lady, so poised, so confident, she really loved her students. We had some of the best teachers in the world. They started out at Stephens-Lee and most of them went to South French Broad High, you know, when they opened the new school. So it was awesome. I had good teachers; what they taught, the way they acted. They were role models. They helped me to pattern my life.

PH: When you said that they were role models, can you give any insight to that in the time you were growing up, how important that was?

DC: Very important because I was always growing up kind of—especially Miss Forney, I think about some of the things that Miss Forney had to taught us, the way she kept herself, she had a pride for being African-American, being Black, that really left a mark. I often would think about that. Then Miss Eubanks, her elegance, the way she talked, the way she dressed, always being a lady. That helped me pattern.

PH: Did you have special events that you liked to attend with your school?

DC: Football. We were awesome. A lot of my friends attending the reunion were football players. Herbert Wilkins was one of the best athletes and runners in Western North Carolina. We had an awesome football team. Really. That was during the time, too, that they had a market downtown on Biltmore Avenue, the Downtown City Market, and for

every time one of our players made a touchdown, they could go to Downtown City Market and get a ham. So back then, that was big. Then we had a rival, Charlotte, the football team in Charlotte, North Carolina, was one of our rivals and we hated them with a passion. We would always say, when we got to play them or when they played us, 'We'll win the game or we'll win the fight. Take your choice.'

PH: Sounds like so much fun.

DC: It was. It was just—you know, going to the games and seeing people and just hanging out with your friends. There was a drive-in that everybody would go to which was down on McDowell or where McDowell used to be. It was called Six Points and that was the gathering place. Everybody would gather there after a football game or a basketball game. And they had some of the best food. Milkshakes, out of this world.

Fried chicken. Hot dogs. Everybody gathered at Six Points. And you know it was a really safe place for us to go after the games. So your mom knew that if you were at Six Points, everybody was going to be down there and we looked after each other, no fighting or anything like that. It was just a really good time.

PH: Were any clubs you were involved with in school?

DC: Yes, I was on the Student Council, I didn't make Honor Society quite yet. I was on Student Council the whole time and in the Library Club.

PH: What did you do in Library Club?

DC: Well you'd go in every day and you'd help the Librarian keep the Library together and keep abreast of any new books coming out because some of the students might ask you about them or ask you for a recommendation like the best thing to read.

PH: Would you say a lot of the students at your school were involved in the desegregation movement? Were they excited about the desegregation happening at schools or would they rather have stayed at Stephens-Lee?

DC: I think that we were excited in terms of getting equality, because that had not always been the case. But I think looking back now, some of us really wondered if we benefitted from it.

PH: Could you tell me a little bit more about that, about the benefits or maybe the not so much the benefits?

DC: Okay. I think when we were all together, there was more of a sense of community, a sense of looking out for one another, more a sense of helping each other up and I'm not so sure because it's so spread out now. We've lost of the sense of community, lost a lot of the values that were a part of our community, that made us, that helped out people like me become who I am. I think we've lost that.

PH: And were there any big events you remember happening at school that really stand out to you?

DC: I remember, well of course the proms that we used to have. We used to have a Christmas formal, that was really, really nice and Junior/Senior Proms and just working

that. When we were at South French Broad, the junior year you had to raise money for the prom and that was big for us, raising money to pay for the prom. Senior year, we got to enjoy it because the junior class had to work for you to have a prom. That was really nice, Junior/Senior Prom. Then, what was happening in the Civil Rights movement, that was a big part of going to school, of going to South French Broad, watching that, seeing what Martin Luther King was saying and then experiencing his death and then shortly after that, Robert Kennedy's death.

PH: And how do you think both Martin Luther King and JFK's death, did it affect education that day in school, was the day any different?

DC: I think things were—probably a lot of people wanted really to protest especially when Martin Luther King died and I think there may have been some small protests but nothing too big. But that didn't say that we didn't feel it, that it didn't hurt, that it didn't bother us, because it did and I think in a lot of cases we chose to take the non-violent approach and say, 'Okay.'

PH: Do you think it was because of the teaching that you received at Stephens- Lee why a lot of students decided to stay off the streets and keep going to school and take the peaceful route?

DC: Yes.

PH: Were there any clubs at your school that worked with the Civil Rights movement?

DC: Not that I can remember. There probably were but not that I can remember.

PH: Tell me a little more, this is kind of going back, but tell me what prom night was like.

DC: Prom night for me—junior year I went to the prom with the same guy for two years because I was dating a guy and we dated probably a good bit during high school. It was awesome. Buying a dress was awesome. We had a store in Asheville that was called Winner's and all of the girls got their dresses from Winner's because what Winner's Department Store did is they kept a list of every girl that bought a dress from all of the schools and what they did was with that list was they compared it to make sure that no two girls in the same school bought the same dress. That was awesome. And then I was working, had a little part-time job, and I laid my dress away, they all had layaway. I laid my dress away and paid on that until I got both of them out and prom night was just really, really special. I went with that guy that was special in my life, I got the corsage and then a big thing we did was my mom would always let us have a sleepover at my house. We did it both proms and after the girls finished prom and all that, they would gather at the house and we would have a good time. And she would even let the boys come in and be around there for a time but they always knew—. My mama's name was Virginia and everybody called her Miss Virginia. Everybody knew that, the guys knew that, 'Okay, there's a certain time we have to be out of Miss Virginia's house and we're going to respect that.' And they did, never had a problem and we had the best time during the prom. It was just awesome.

PH: Was it the same way with the Winter Formal? Did you have sleepovers too?

DC: The Christmas Formal was not as big. It was not as big as Junior/Senior Prom.

PH: Tell me a little bit more about your mother. Was she a big figure in the community?

DC: No, she was sort of—well, in our community she was. A lot of young kids called her "Mother" because that was what she was and she had this impact on children that was just amazing. She was a very kind, very caring woman but one who corrects you, puts you in your place and just like that, in a split second and you knew she meant business. But then, five minutes later she would come back and do something very, very special for you. I grew up part of the time in what's called Erskine Street Apartments, and the whole community knew "Mother." And our house was always full of young people going in and out and some of those people still talk about Mom today. In that respect she was a big figure. She was an encourager, just an encourager.

PH: Did you have any siblings?

DC: Yes, there were four of us, two boys and two girls. I'm sort of the middle child. I had an older brother, then me, I had a younger sister. My older brother and my younger sister are now deceased so it's just me, the middle child and my younger brother.We grew up together like I said, my mom was an amazing woman and we grew up close. People talk about fighting with their sisters and brothers? Well, first of all you weren't going to do

that in my mama's house. My dad was quiet and soft-spoken He was not the disciplinarian but, he only had to tell you something one time and that was it.

PH: Was your older brother was really close with him?

DC: Close with him, yes. We were born two years and a day apart. His birthday was January the thirtieth and my mine was January the thirty-first. So we were close And my sister and I extremely close, very, very close. Then my younger brother and I were close, but that's how my mom raised us.

PH: Did you go to—you know, if your older brother was going to a movie, did you guys all go to the movie too? Was it that sort of thing?

DC: Not him. 'You're the little sister.' Me and my younger sister, we kind of hung out together. But my younger brother, there's ten years between me and him so by the time he came along, I was pretty much almost grown, so I didn't hang out too much with him.

PH: Did they all go to Stephens-Lee as well?

DC: They all went to—my brother started out—my older brother started out at Stephens-Lee, then he graduated from South French Broad and the rest of us graduated from South French Broad.

PH: Did you have some of the same teachers at South French Broad?

DC: We did. Now wait a minute. I can't remember if my younger brother graduated from Asheville High or not. I think he might have graduated form South French Broad. I'll have to ask him to make sure.

PH: Were there any really close friends that you had through high school?

DC: One of my close friends, Maxine Daniels and then Gail Hansley. We were close. It was like, we were real close but when we came up everybody was kind of close but you still just had your same, those two or three people that you'd really run around with.

PH: The boy that you dated or that you went to the Prom with, were you dating all through high school or were there a couple different people that you just went out together with?

DC: Pretty much.

PH: And what was he like?

DC: Very nice. Very nice. He's married now so—.

PH: After Stephens-Lee what happened in your life after that?

DC: After Stephens-Lee, I went off to North Carolina Central University in Durham, graduated from there and then I came back home to work and worked for Red Cross here in Asheville for thirty years and retired from there.

PH: What was the type of work that you did?

DC: I worked in disaster programs. I was Director of Preparedness and Disaster. Nine-eleven, Midwest floods, service to military families.

PH: What degree did you get?

DC: I got a degree in Sociology.

PH: Did you study that at all at Stephens-Lee?

DC: No, not really. I had that Sociology class but that was part of the curriculum that every senior had to take. I didn't really study it until I got to N.C. Central.

PH: Did you have any favorite classes at Stephens-Lee?

DC: Sociology, being in Miss Forney's class and then Miss Foster's English class. Loved those.

PH: Was the English class based on reading a lot of books or was it more writing based?

DC: It was kind of reading books but I can't remember a lot of the books I read but we read the classics.

PH: Is there anything that you think should be remembered about Stephens-Lee?

DC: Just that it was a pillar of the community. It was foundational and basic for so many of us. Out of this school, came some of the most amazing individuals in the world who went on to get great jobs, contribute to the community. Awesome.

PH: A lot of times in History class they'd tell us, 'During the desegregation movement, it was big because they got a better education, but would you have said that at the Stephens-Lee School, was it a really great education that you got?

DC: It was. Because it prompted you to go on and do better. It was a spirit of excellence in the school, competing to be in the Honor Society was something that was second

nature. It was just a part of what the school was, making students, everybody that came here, making them or helping them to be the best that they could be.

PH: Growing up in the time that you did, was it kind of an uncertain time, was Stephens-Lee your rock during that, when all these riots were happening? Or was that, were you were sheltered a little bit form that?

DC: Pretty much, pretty much.

PH: Thank you so much for talking to me. It was a fantastic opportunity speaking to you. I really appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW.